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Hog Creek Review

Movement through Dunkirk in *Atonement*

Robbie Turner is fighting for the British in World War II and is struggling to find his way to Dunkirk beach to be evacuated and to return to his forbidden love, Cecelia. However, when he hears the sound of the ocean and finally finds the beach, not everything is how he believed it to appear. The sorrow and despair captured in the scene fully encompasses the recent years of Robbie's life. Born as a servant's son, he's made a life for himself working on the land of a wealthy family; however, his life is undone when he is falsely accused of raping a young girl. He is originally sent to prison, but finds himself in the middle of the war, and this scene is his painful realization that he will never return to his former life, nor will he ever return to the woman he loves. The brilliant one-take scene encapsulates the fluidity of Robbie's crushed spirit and gives us such an intimate space as both Robbie and the audience take in the full monstrosity on the beach of Dunkirk in roughly five and a half minutes of continuous chaos.

The scene begins while Robbie and two of his companions talk to the captain and discover very quickly that it is going to be difficult for them to leave the beach, and becomes even more astronomical with the other 300,000 men on the beach who also are longing for home. Despair and hopelessness carefully settle over Robbie as he begins to fully take in the intensity of the situation. The scene strikes the audience and gives them a feeling of a wild circus and a horrible nightmare. With the Ferris wheel swirling the smoke of the decay on the beach, the men acting like children as they play on the carousel, we are thrown into the mess with Robbie and are shocked at the disarray before our eyes. Robbie's nightmares come to life as he sees the horses being shot and the wild man on the mast of a destroyed boat yelling, "Can you hear me laddies? I'm coming home!" This man's delusions of returning home bring to mind the words of Cecelia, "come back to me," and in this moment

Robbie realizes that he too has been delusional. He witnesses the soldiers solemnly burning books on the beach, which brands the memory of Cecelia and Robbie's first romantic encounter in the library where their love sparked. Like those books, the memory now turns to ash. These vividly bizarre connections, just like dreams, provide the viewer true realness and the overwhelming emotion of entrapment and doom.

In this one-take scene, a Steadicam was used to perform this magnificent crane shot. The cinematography is so extraordinarily smooth and lyrical that it captivates the audience but also illustrates the magnitude of realism and aids us in stepping through our television screens and walking alongside Robbie and the turmoil. The camera is almost always completely facing Robbie and invites us in to see his full reaction to this carnival dream world he has entered. The way the camera moves in front of the soldiers and the 360 degree shot around the men's choir is truly amazing of the skill of the cameraman and continues to draw in the audience.

Breezing in and out of this scene is the sweeping, disheartening music that returns the motif of ruin and desperateness. As the music grows in the middle of the scene, it makes you wonder if it will eventually change into a chance of hope, but truly it's the sound of Robbie's heart for as more of the scene is unveiled the incredible weight is completely washing over him as he starts to lose his breath. The scene continues to send us deeper into despair when we come upon the men's choir, especially when you listen to the lyrics, "Take from our souls the strain and stress, The coolness of Thy peace, Let sense be numb, let flesh retire, O still, small voice of calm." This is a prayer of death. These men are asking the Lord to let them have a peaceful death here on this beach because they know that most likely no one is going to survive and make it home to their loved ones. Even the ending verse of "O still, small voice of calm" refers to nearing death as everything grows slow and still, that voices dull and God is pulling them toward the heavens.

By watching this one-take, five-minute scene, one can understand the entirety of *Atonement*; the scene begins with hope as Robbie and his friends have made their way to the beach at last and he's so close to home, but it quickly shifts to a painful realization that there is no hope and it ends with a view of the totality of the shattered world that has become his

home. Combing the poetic movement of the camera and the captivating musical score, the cinematographers of *Atonement* have created one of the more memorable scenes in recent film, a scene I could only describe as beautifully heartbreaking.